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ABSTRACT

This guide was designed to help secondary teachers use a series of radio programs based on the book, "First-Person America," an oral history collection derived in turn from a massive body of first-person accounts originally collected during the 1930's by the Federal Writer's Project. The series dramatizes the texture of everyday life in America during the era of the Great Depression and also during the nineteenth century, through the words of ordinary citizens. Men and women from a variety of regions, occupations, and ethnic groups were interviewed. Their stories were written down and they are spoken in the radio series by contemporary professional actors. The guide discusses how this new oral approach to history helps improve student attitudes toward the study of the past, presents tips for using the series, and provides suggestions for helping students learn to listen. The bulk of the guide contains a brief description of the narratives and study tips, including discussion questions, for each of the six programs comprising the radio series. A resource list for teachers concludes the guide. (RM)

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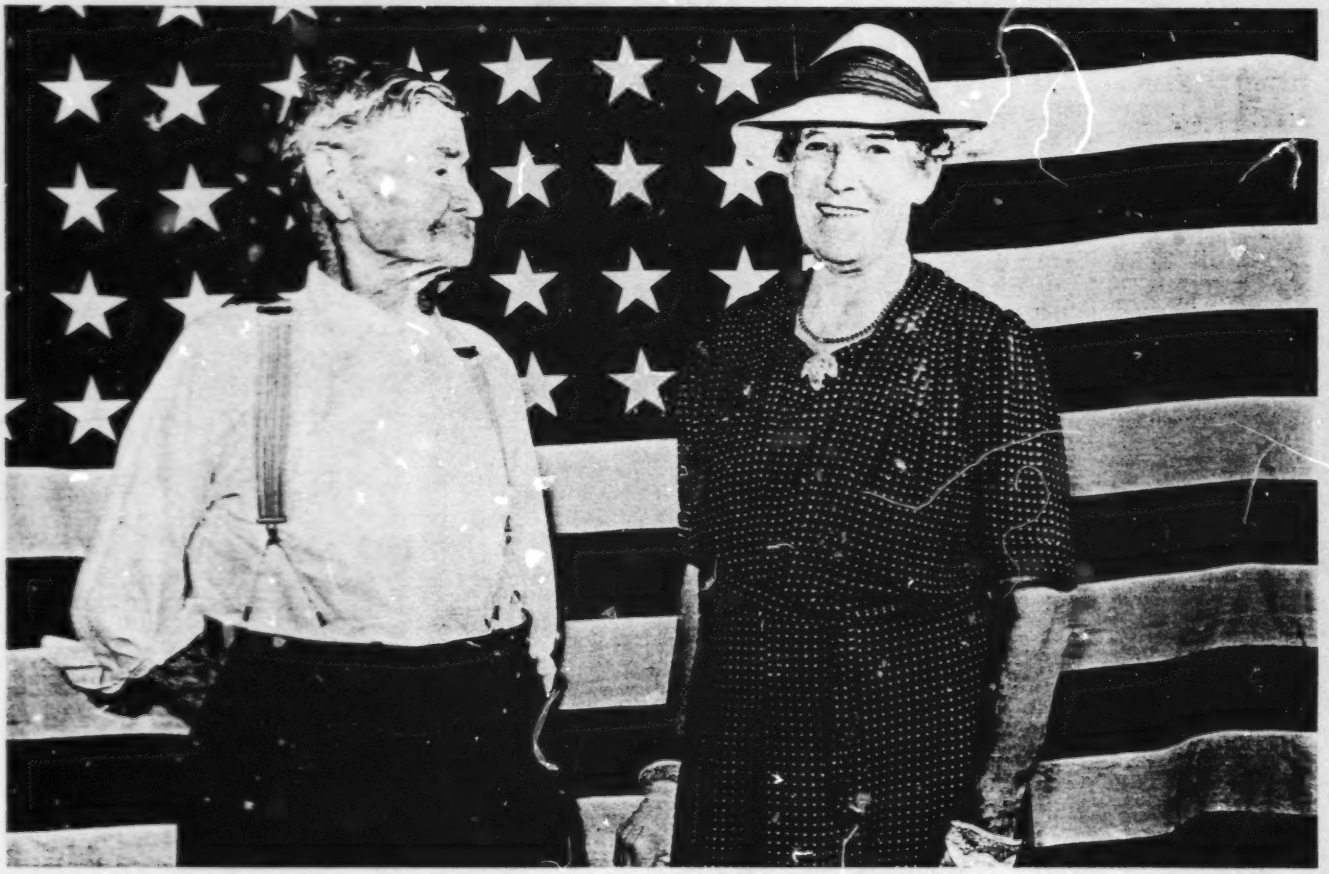
A Teacher's Guide to

First-Person America

Voices from the Thirties

Social Education; v45, n6, pg. 443-50, Oct 1981



A series of six half-hour programs dramatizing the life histories collected during the Depression by the Federal Writers' Project.

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First-Person America *is based on the book,* First-Person America *by Ann Banks.*

First-Person America: *Voices from the Thirties*

*Introduction by Ann Banks**

The *First-Person America* radio series was produced by WGBH Boston and broadcast by National Public Radio. Major funding for *First-Person America* was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding was provided by the Ford Foundation.

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First-Person America: Voices from the Thirties is a series of radio programs based on oral history interviews collected during the 1930s by the Federal Writers' Project. The series dramatizes the texture of everyday life in America through the words of ordinary citizens: farmers, artisans, factory workers. These stories were written down by the Federal Writers in the 1930s; and they are spoken in the radio series by contemporary professional actors.

The Federal Writers' Project was based on the idea that unemployed writers, like unemployed carpenters, had a right to jobs. Along with its companion Federal Arts Project in music, art, and theater, the Federal Writers' Project was part of the New Deal's national work relief program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

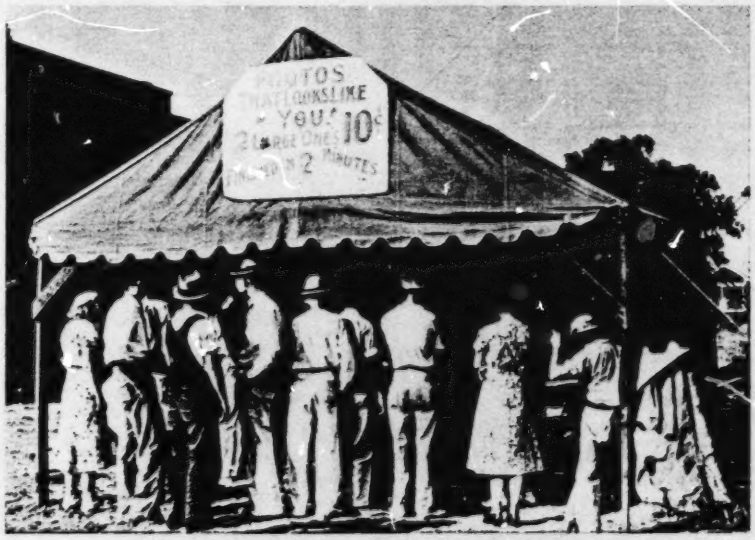
At its peak the Federal Writers' Project employed 6500 writers and other white-collar workers at a salary of $20 a week. Participating writers included many who already had or later achieved national literary reputations, including Ralph Ellison, Nelson Algren, May Swenson, Saul Bellow, and Richard Wright. During the early years of the project, the Federal Writers worked on a series of guidebooks which remain their best-known undertaking. They went on to gather the largest body of first-person narratives ever collected in this country.

More than 10,000 men and women from a variety of regions, occupations, and ethnic groups told their stories. The narratives in *First-Person America*, the book and the radio series, were selected from among these accounts. As you and your students listen, you will hear people as diverse as an Irish maid from Massachusetts, a French-Canadian textile worker from New Hampshire's Amoskeag Mills, a Bahamian midwife from Florida, a Portuguese fisherman from Cape Cod, a patent-medicine pitchman from North Carolina, and a jazz drummer from Harlem. Federal Writers also collected reminiscences of ways of life that were long past by the time the Depression began. Many Americans in the 1930s remembered the nineteenth century as vividly as some people recall the Depression today. People told, for example, of surviving the Chicago fire of 1871, making the pioneer journey to the western territories, and fleeing to America to avoid conscription into the Czar's army.

This vast store of unpublished material—more than 150,000 pages—was deposited in the Library of Congress in 1941. Efforts at the time to process and organize the material foundered for lack of funds. The papers were housed in a small, windowless room, familiarly called "the Buzzard's Nest," at the end of a labyrinth in the Library of Congress stacks. The size and chaotic condition of the collection undoubtedly discouraged potential users and, as a result, its existence was virtually forgotten for forty years.

The narratives in *First-Person America* call for a special look at American history. The Depression forced many Americans to redefine their goals for the future—to imagine a life that would be meaningful in the face of lean material circumstances. They looked to former times for a heritage that could offer guidance. As John Dos Passos wrote in *The Ground We Stand On* (New York, 1941), "We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on. In spite of the changing conditions of life, they were not very different from ourselves, their thoughts were the grandfathers of our thoughts, they managed to meet situations as difficult as those we have to face, to meet them sometimes lightheartedly, and in some measure to make their hopes prevail. We need to know how they did it."

The life history narratives collected by the Federal Writers' Project are an expression of this impulse to discover a usable past. The stories reveal what people turned to for strength and where they looked for meaning: ethnic roots, family life, the spirit of community that came from shared hardships. Today, as we encounter the records of the Federal Writers' Project, we may feel, with Dos Passos, that "a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present..." The life histories in *First-Person America: Voices from the Thirties* add the resonance of personal recollection to the formal record of written history.



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What is History?

As H.G. Wells lamented in the early part of this century, history often becomes a chronicle of wars and kings. But that conception of history is giving way to an enlarged vision of our past which includes the ordinary events of everyday life as well. The Federal Writers' Project pioneered the collection of first-person narratives by people who would not otherwise have left records of their lives. Benjamin Botkin, Folklore Editor for the Project, called for an emphasis on "history from the bottom up," in which ordinary people become their own historians.

New Approaches

How does this changing perception of history, with its new techniques and approaches, help improve student attitudes toward study of the past? First, most students find the new history inherently interesting because of its focus on individuals. The stories of human beings and their lives hold enormous power to entertain and intrigue, as programs such as Charles Kuralt's *On the Road* series have demonstrated. Today the techniques of oral history are being used in public school settings in all parts of the United States. In 1980 alone, high school students in more than 200 oral history projects collected first-person narratives on everything from hog butchering to folk medicine. Many of these projects use as a model the work of Eliot Wigginton and his students at *Foxfire*, a student project in rural Appalachia.

Second, understanding the human dimensions of history will give students a precious gift: heightened knowledge of who they themselves are. The intellectual historian Carl Becker suggested that one of history's basic functions was to enlarge our world by including in it the memory of things said and done. Personal accounts do more than encourage respect: they also help initiate dialogue between old and young, parents and children. This in turn enables us to evaluate our actions in the light of the actions of those who have gone before us. When high school students go out into their own communities to interview older community members about their lives, they learn about the conflicts of people living in another period, thereby heightening their appreciation of history as a way of understanding the present. They learn about general conditions from an individual perspective and are introduced to the particulars of history: the texture and pattern of everyday life.

Finally, the new approach to history, as demonstrated in the first-person stories you are about to hear, brings about the realization that all of us, past and present, are united by our common humanity. Circumstances change from one generation to another but the need for love, friends, and success occurs across generations. The story of our past introduces and informs the story of our present.

How To Use This Series

You may use *First-Person America* in several ways:

... as supplementary material

These programs can add a vivid personal dimension to the issues and ideas found in United States history textbooks by illustrating the impact of public events on private lives.

... as a stimulus to inquiry

This series can encourage class discussions and research. Many of the issues of the 1930s continue to be concerns today, as the activities suggested in this guide indicate.

... as a model for your own oral history program

The series may lead your students to become oral historians themselves, collecting the personal reminiscences and recollections of people they know. Oral history collections for student research exist in every state, and include subject matter as diverse as life as a prisoner of war, farming techniques, and Indian legends.

Tips for Listening

Accustomed as they are to the visual medium of television, students may need help in learning to listen. Some suggestions:

a. Create a short guide to each program which will focus attention, perhaps with some notes. These can be adapted from the synopses which follow. Or you can have students summarize each program or interview after listening.

b. Select one or two items from the "For Study" sections that follow. Ask students to listen with these questions in mind.

c. Have students compare the dramatizations with the written interviews in the book, *First-Person America*.

d. Encourage the class to examine photographs in *First-Person America* while listening.

e. Let the students tell their own histories to the class, based on the models they hear.

Please note that people portrayed in this series look at some of the harsh realities of life during the Depression. For example, Program Three covers "shimmy dancing" as well as berry picking as a way to make ends meet. Program Four's interview with Anna Novak and Program Six's evocation of gamblers and prostitutes are vivid re-creations of what some people consider the seamy side of life; you may want to preview these sections or the entire series before using it with your class.

"Those guys would have laughed at you if you'd have said vaudeville was going out. They were sitting pretty, spending it as fast as it was coming in, talking about how they wowed them, complimenting themselves all the time. They never thought of the future; they thought it would go on and on forever."

Thomas Graham
Out-of-work actor, 1939

Program 1

Troupers and Pitchmen: A Vanishing World

The first program examines a part of American life that no longer existed in the 1930s but was a recent memory: vaudeville palaces and carnival jammers. The stories in this program—those of a purveyor of lucky charms, a patent medicine pitchman, a circus hand, a vaudeville comic—evoke a more individualistic era in American history, a time when entertaining and selling often merged and carnival ethics required that you "amuse the suckers as you parted them from their money." By focusing on the link between entertaining and selling, the program dramatizes the changing economy of the period.

For Study

1.

Ask students if they think there could be a relationship between the pitchmen of the 1890s and the announcers on television commercials today. Is selling a form of entertainment?

2.

Do students think government regulations today would restrict or prohibit the sale of Wizard Oil? Would they buy Wizard Oil—why or why not? How might advertising claims for Wizard Oil be limited today? Some students might want to look up how government regulations have changed since the 1930s.

3.

The program describes peddlers who were so successful that today their products are sold nationwide. Tracing the history of some of these companies can be a fascinating enterprise. Perhaps there are local companies that can serve as the focus of a student investigation. Students might consider other business patterns as well: the mom and pop grocery store giving way to the supermarket chain; the fast food industry changing traditional eating habits; gasoline stations that have moved from full- to self-service. These changes suggest an array of topics for study and opportunities for interviews.

4.

The change from vaudeville to motion pictures produced a personal economic crisis for those who could not make the transition. Not long ago, owners of motion picture theaters felt challenged by television. With widespread use of home computers, video recorders and cable television, entertainment will probably change dramatically again. Discuss who is likely to profit and who is likely to lose. Recent strikes in the film industry underline the potential conflict inherent in such economic change. Discuss.

5.

An excellent description of the vanished world of troupers and pitchmen is found in the introduction to chapter nine of *First-Person America*. You might want to assign this for further reading.

"How did I happen to become a peddler? When I came to Chicago in 1870 there was nothing else to do. I was eighteen years old. I had learned no trade in Russia. The easiest thing to do was to peddle."

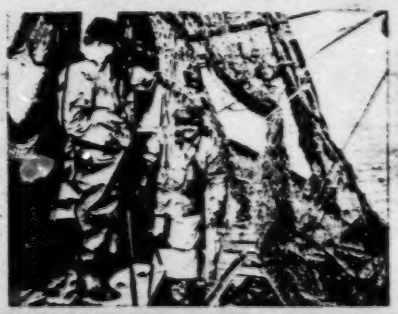
Morris Horowitz
Chicago peddler, 1939

Program 2

When I First Came To This Land

The struggle between preserving ethnic identity and adapting to life in America is reflected in the content of this program, whose title comes from a song composed by host Oscar Brand. In dramatized narratives, a fish peddler from Chicago, a Russian-Jewish itinerant peddler, and a French Canadian textile worker from New Hampshire describe how they made their way in the new country. Manuel Captiva, a Portuguese fisherman from Cape Cod, tells some of the hardships of immigration; his story touches on the conflicts that arose between generations as the young rejected the customs of the old country in favor of American ways. In a contemporary interview, Morton Royse, director of the Social Ethnic Studies Unit of the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, explains the Project's reflection of America's ethnic diversity.

Immigration to America continues today. Consider some recent examples: the mass exodus of boat people from Cambodia and Vietnam, the influx of Cubans and Haitians through the Straits of Florida, and the continuing entry of farm workers from Mexico. *First-Person America* offers insights, through history, into present-day patterns of immigration. Thousands of today's Americans were themselves once newcomers, or are newcomers still. They wait only for the interviewer patient enough to seek them out.



For Study

1.

Discuss the political and economic realities that motivated the people in Program 2 to come to America. What were their hopes and dreams? Do you think their motivations were different from those of the immigrants of today? The book *First-Person America* contains additional histories of immigrants who arrived before World War II. Studs Terkel's *American Dreams: Lost and Found* includes stories of those who arrived more recently.

2.

Ask your students for their reaction to lines like "We are the Portuguese Pilgrims." What different ethnic groups make up your community? How did they arrive? What industries have they engaged in? How have the customs of their countries of origin been reflected in the community?

3.

Immigrants sometimes encounter hostility because they are different, or because they pose an economic threat to the indigenous population. That story is dramatically illustrated along the Texas Gulf coast, in the competition between the long-established Texas shrimpers and the newly arrived Vietnamese. Can your students think of other examples of this kind of friction? Can they provide examples of Americans holding out the hand of friendship to newly arrived immigrants? What factors help break down resistance to accepting newcomers?

4.

In one pattern of immigration, a single family member comes to America and works to earn the money to bring over other members of the family. Students might be interested in tracing their own family histories. If members of some students' families do not remember a past in other countries, those students might go to the library for books about immigrants from their specific countries of origin. The two-volume *Historical Statistics of the United States*, available in your library (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975), can provide a wealth of information on general immigration patterns.

5.

The U.S. Coast Guard has had the responsibility for protecting Cubans who desire entry into the United States, and at the same time preventing Cuban-Americans from going to Cuba to rescue family members. Ask students to discuss the ethical issues involved. (A dramatic film of that mission, *Follow Me To Freedom*, is available for your classes by writing to the Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, G-BPA-1, 2100 Second Street S.W., Washington, D.C. 20593.)

"Pa would turn over in his grave if he knew I went out washing and cleaning, but I have to. After all, I wasn't used to working for cheap people and I don't do it now."

Marie Haggarty
Housemaid, 1938

Program 2

Making Ends Meet

This program suggests some of the ways women have traditionally taken up the economic slack during hard times: by selling their domestic skills as well as by saving in the home. Pride in autonomy is an important theme in the stories of a 90-year-old Vermont farmwife, a woman from Harlem recalling her rural Southern childhood, a widowed Italian boarding-house keeper, a second-generation Irish domestic. Their experiences have a familiar ring today as we watch inflation indexes climb and unemployment figures soar.

Recent studies of women who enter the work force indicate that many of them take on outside jobs while retaining traditional roles at home. For some, this dual responsibility creates enormous difficulties affecting jobs, child-rearing, and marriages. You might want to discuss this with students before they listen to Program 3, or have them compare traditional and changing roles of women by interviewing mothers, grandmothers, and other women from more than one generation in your community. How have the customs and mores of our society changed in regard to women's roles? What attitudes have not changed much? What can we predict for the future?

For Study

1.

Hog dressing and berry picking, two of the chores described in "Making Ends Meet," are reminiscent of the stories recorded by students in the *Foxfire* project. Discuss with your students what local customs and folkways they might record for posterity.

2.

The berry picking story also suggests some of the ways people in the 1930s combined work with socializing. Ask students how our concept of family has changed since that period. What are some things that may account for the changes? Is the family still important as a economic unit? Encourage students to be as specific as possible.

3.

Some observers have suggested that an important result of the Depression was "the realization that people needed to stick together." Ask if any students have experienced a crisis that has created a sense of togetherness (being lost with a friend, the death or illness of a family member, a losing or winning streak on a team, etc.). Then ask if students can think of recent community or national examples of the same kind of thing.

4.

The story of two young women running away with the carnival reflects the realities of family strife and failure during the Depression era. While much of *First-Person America* focuses on those who succeeded despite the odds, Babe Parmalee ran out of luck. Ask students how they define success and failure and how society at large does. What part do background and education play and what is the impact of luck? Are these factors different for men and women?

Continued...

5.

Mrs. Gerbati, the widow of the Vermont stonecutter, symbolizes those women who must provide for their families without the economic assistance of a husband and at the same time bring up children. Today the traditional family structure has been altered by the growing numbers of single-parent families. Encourage students to discuss how divorced women manage both job and family. What is expected of them? Popular entertainment has recently begun to portray the problems of working women. One example is the film *Nine to Five*. Students who have seen the film may prepare a class report.

"Long ago, I wanted to join the AF of L Union, the Amalgamated Butchers and Meat Cutters, they called it. They wouldn't let me in. Never said it to my face, but the reason of it was plain. Negro...."
Jim Cole
Stockyard butcher, 1938

Program 4

Talking Union

Through the dramatized narratives of Chicago packinghouse workers, this program focuses on the fierce and dramatic struggles for unionization in the 1930s. The workers told their stories at a critical moment in labor history: just as the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) came to the stockyards. Black workers describe the CIO's role in improving race relations in the yards, and women workers discuss the conflicts between militant unionism and traditional standards of femininity. Also in the program are two contemporary interviews, one with Estelle Zabritsky, a packinghouse worker who told her story to the Federal Writers' Project forty years ago, and the other with Betty Burke, the Federal Writer who interviewed her.

One theme of the program is working conditions. Much has been done by unions to improve working conditions since the Depression, both through legislation and litigation. Tracing the development of unions and their early goals before listening will provide students with a richer context for understanding the issues raised in Program 4.

For Study

1.

Unions are started and extended by individuals who may risk their livelihood and, especially many years ago, even their lives to achieve their goals. This was recently dramatized for the textile industry by the motion picture *Norma Rae*. Have any of your students seen that film? If so, have them describe it to the class. Other students might approach the topic by reading and reporting on *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, an important novel about early conditions in the meat packing industry in Chicago.

2.

What are the contemporary views held by union officials, by workers, and by management? Your students might investigate those attitudes by interviewing community or family members who work in unionized fields or who have strong feelings about unions. Students might want to compare their findings or combine them into a class study of attitudes toward unions.

3.

Have students research and report on the actions by government over the past fifty years that have served the interests of unions, and those that have proved more helpful to management. How have the goals of unions changed since the 1930s? This project might be refined to use local resources by consulting with your librarian.

"...Only trouble is that a machine can pick coal faster than a man, and when it ain't workin', it don't have to eat."
Fred Harrison
Missouri coal miner, 1939

Program 5

Smoke and Steel

These narratives serve as reminders of the human cost of building America and suggest how industrial work became a legitimate subject of literary discourse in America. An Oklahoma oilfield roustabout, a Missouri coal miner, and a New York City construction worker, are among those who give a vivid—and often humorous—picture of the hardships of work, both physical and psychological. In a contemporary interview, novelist and former Federal Writer Jack Conroy recalls the coal miner he interviewed for the Project and describes his own experiences in the "Monkey Nest" mine where his father and brothers died.

Industrial life in the 1930s reverberated with noise, hard physical labor, and danger. "Smoke and Steel" (the program title is from Carl Sandburg's poem) suggests some of the changes that affected industry in the early part of the twentieth century as mechanization simultaneously eliminated the most backbreaking labor and reduced the need for skilled craftsmen. The increase in mechanization threatened workers, who feared for their jobs as machines worked faster and more efficiently than they did. Sometimes, however, the march of progress was interrupted by the inadequacy of new techniques, as canoemaker Henry Mitchell recalled. Still other techniques offered hope, as Anthony Tonnelli, a granite worker who looked to machinery to eliminate the threat of silicosis, points out.

For Study

1.

Ask students how the kinds of work treated in "Smoke and Steel" symbolize the human costs of building America. Can students find examples of the contribution of individual effort, self-sacrifice, and exploitation in other occupations? Are there examples in other programs of *First-Person America*?

2.

What attitudes do the interviewees in this program display toward their work? Why did they choose certain occupations? Studs Terkel's *Working* examines contemporary attitudes toward work—how ordinary Americans feel about their occupations. Students may want to use it, plus interviews of both working and unemployed people in their communities, as the basis for reports on attitudes toward work today.

3.

Your students might read *The Disinherited* by Jack Conroy. How are his interviewing experiences reflected in his writing? Can students explain why Carl Sandburg's "Smoke and Steel" is used to open and close the program? What other poems or songs might have been appropriate?

4.

What kinds of hazards existed in the work place during the 1930s? What recourse did families have in the 1930s when a father or mother was injured or killed on the job? Have students find out what the primary hazards are today, and what remedies are available. Students may use this information for a comparative study of job safety and compensation in the '30s and the '80s.

5.

Michael Donegal, a Scottish stonecutter, suggested that while silicosis was bad, the worst harm that could come to a worker was to lose his job. Can students tell the story of someone who has lost a job? What kinds of impact does loss of job have on an individual? What did Donegal mean when he said, "Being without work kills... inside—a worse way"?

"God made all this and he made it for everybody. And he made it equal...I breathe the same air old man Ford and old man Rockefeller breathe. They got all the money and I ain't got nothing, but they got to breathe the same air I do."

Eli Luster
Harlem street preacher, 1939

Program 6

Harlem Stories

"Harlem Stories" is about the experience of urban black Americans during the Depression. The program centers around the dramatized narrative of Lloyd Green, a Pullman porter who, in a barroom conversation with Federal Writer Ralph Ellison, lamented his move north to Harlem. His story of city life—its corruption as well as its vitality—is echoed in the first-person accounts of a street peddler, a jazz drummer, a rent-party proprietress, and a street-corner preacher. Langston Hughes's poem "Lenox Avenue Mural" sets the tone of the program: "What happens to a dream deferred?" Between 1916 and 1923 an estimated one million blacks moved north, in what has been described by historians as the greatest internal migration of an ethnic group in American history. But dreams of economic freedom were shattered by the Depression. Unemployment for blacks was more than double that of whites; whites displaced blacks from even the lower paying jobs whites would not have taken before the Depression.

The story of Clyde Kingfish Smith, a rhyming street peddler, illustrates the kind of ingenuity that many Harlemites relied on to survive. The rent party was another example. Every Saturday night, a neighbor would throw a corn liquor celebration for which admission was a quarter. Gambling and prostitution often accompanied such parties, as the interview with Bernice Gore reveals.

For Study

1.

The Depression was harder on black Americans than on other segments of the population. Ask students what factors contributed to this. How did the black community respond? Were some New York residents immune to the Depression? Was this true in other communities?

2.

The history of Harlem is a fascinating topic for study. Have students do research to answer the following questions: Who first settled in Harlem? What was the Harlem Renaissance? What forces caused Harlem to become a black ghetto? How has Harlem changed since the Depression?

3.

Jazz drummer Jim Barber expresses his anger toward the white merchants of 125th Street. Ask students to speculate on why so much anger was focused on merchants. Follow-up research can ask what caused the riots of 1935 or why the sinking of the Titanic was a symbol to blacks even a decade after it occurred.

4.

Several black Federal Writers went on to become famous authors. Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison are notable examples. Have students read some of their works and try to determine how their writings reflect their experience of the Depression. Can they discover ways in which Ralph Ellison has acknowledged that his novel *Invisible Man* is indebted to his experience as a Project interviewer?

5.

The program theme—"What happens to a dream deferred?"—might be asked today, as high interest rates and rising prices are making economic gain for many, especially many blacks, remote. If there were a Depression now, might things be different for Harlem than they were in the '30s?

ources for eachers

Federal Writers' Project

Jerre Mangione. *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972.

Oral History Books

James Hoopes. *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979.

Edward D. Ives. *The Tape-Recorded Interview*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980.

George L. Mehaffy, Thad Sitton, and O.L. Davis Jr. Oral History in the Classroom. "How To Do it Series." Washington, D.C.: The National Council for the Social Studies, 1979.

Richard Tallman and Laurna Tallman. *Country Folks: A Handbook for Student Folklore Collectors*. Batesville: Arkansas College Folklore Archive Publications, 1978.

Recordings

Grass Roots: An Oral History of the American People. Princeton: Visual Education Corporation, 1976.

Organizations

Oral History Association. North Texas State University, P.O. Box 13734, Denton, TX 76203.

The book *First-Person America* is available in hardcover from Alfred A. Knopf and in paperback from Vintage. The book contains 80 life history narratives, including the 30 dramatized in the radio series, as well as an introductory essay on the Federal Writer's Project. The paperback can be ordered from: Random House Inc., 400 Hahn Road, Westminister, MD 21157.

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